BEAUTY AND

Only one thing is important to SPIRITUALIZED's Jason Pierce: making beautiful, soulful music. Earthly matters like chart positions and, well, food just don't interest him. PAUL MOODY joins him for a bowl of soup on the band's European tour. Viennese schmaltz: STEFAN DE BATSELIER

Oh Vienna. As Midge Ure might have had it, when his sideburns were still sharp enough to draw blood, this means nothing to me.

Barely ten minutes from having touched down on the terra firma of the Austrian capital and it is quickly becoming clear we are totally lost. Gothic buildings loom up all around us like spooky beacons, while absurdly wealthy-looking local citizens walk by with their noses in the air, prompting the uneasy sensation that we're not in central Europe at all but have been somehow transported, *Prisoner*-style, to Kensington High Street on a Saturday afternoon after its inhabitants have been on one of those learn-German-in-a-day courses and are determined to make any stranger pay for the inconvenience.

Potentially even more worrying, our only guide in these strange parts happens to be one Jason Pierce, long-term Ambassador Of Narcotics In Pop and veteran space cadet, who is now striding with no little haste in the direction of the nearest restaurant in his white Patrick Cox loafers and khaki jeans with the hollow-cheeked chic of a man who looks for all the world like he's modelling the pick of the autumn collection for cadavers.

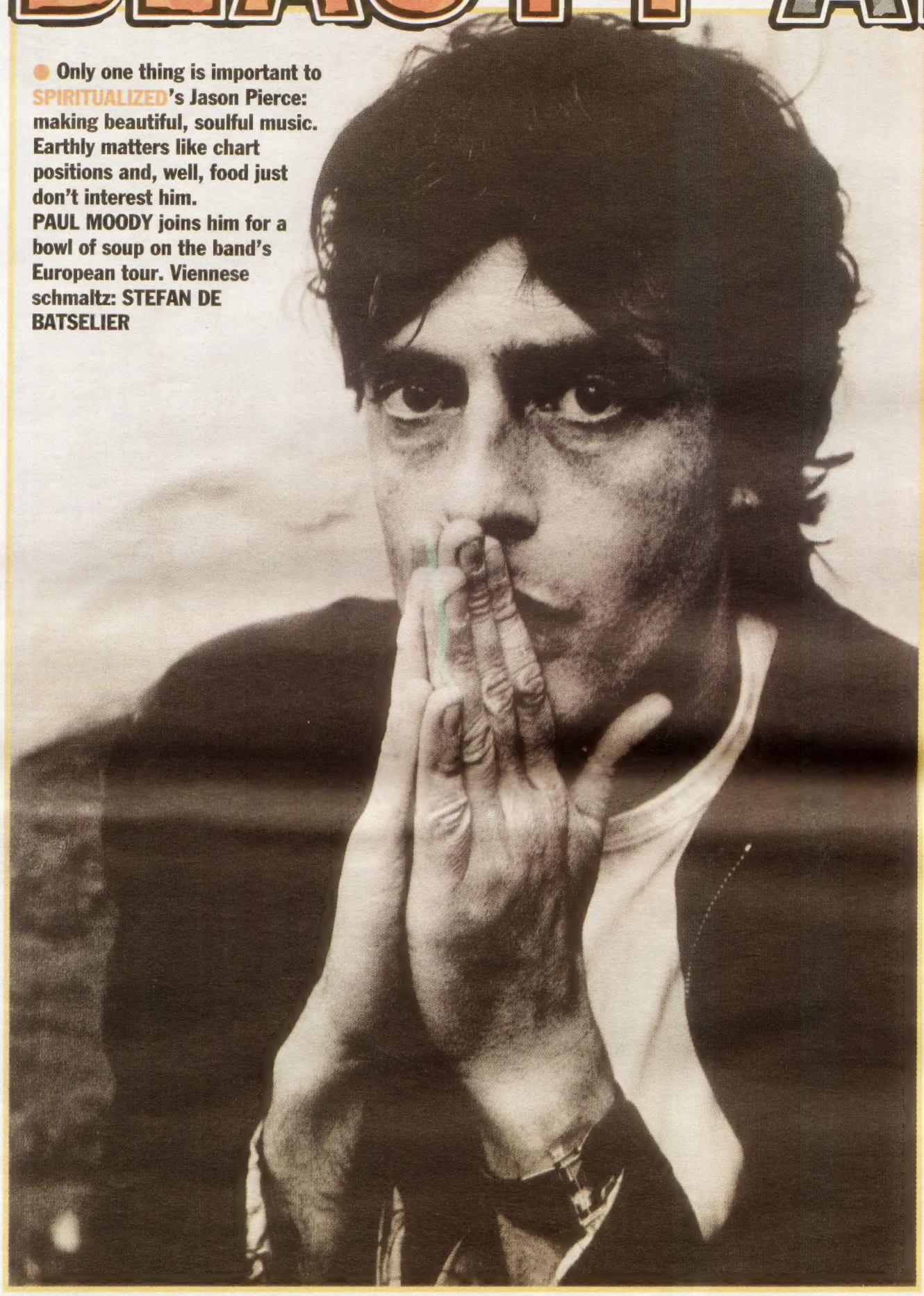
With unnerving organisational skills he leads us to the terrace of a café where we are offered stodge-heavy menus and are about to embark on a thoroughly civilised early-evening meal. Bizarre. Can this really be the same man whose recorded output over the past 12 years has been so drug-drenched he once released a record entitled 'Taking Drugs To Make Music To Take Drugs To'? Whose most recent album comes disguised as a scary drug prescription box? Whose interviews only ever touch on the purity of soul, the beauty of sound and the eloquently warped worldview of the drug-soaked? Who only ever eats *liquids*?

Panic over, and soup duly ordered, Jason fixes his steely blue eyes on your correspondent.

"Did you know that for people who are colour blind the sunrise looks black?" he whispers, mystic and soulful, prior to launching a lengthy exposition on the intricacies of cognitive science.

Erm, looks like it is, yeah.

THE PATIENT'S condition remains normal, then. What's important to realise is that it's everything else *around* him that's changed. For these days his one-man mission to put the cool into pharmaceutical is not the lonely road it once was. Those bashful Gallagher brothers have turned flagrant drug use into an art form, Will Self enlivened the election by taking heroin on the then Prime Minister's private jet and The Verve have barely vacated the Number One slot with the inflammatory 'The Drugs Don't Work' without even the slightest whiff of a tabloid scandal. Very odd. Tolerance levels seem to be up. Equally, despite the plaudits that rained down on him following the release of Spiritualized's debut album 'Laser Guided Melodies' back in 1992 and the relatively grumpy reception offered its fabulous follow-up 'Pure Phase' two years later (another classic), the time seems right for Jason's skewed voyages into sound more than it ever has done. Having surfed into the Top Five of the album chart with the almighty 'Ladies And Gentlemen We Are Floating In Space', the time seems right for his band to finally flow into the mainstream and take its rightful place among the major players.



Jason Pierce: the man who souled the world

"We'd never regress just because Kate's not here. I don't stick on *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and run around naked..." – Jason

The only cloud on the horizon appears to be the situation regarding the whereabouts of Kate Radley. Long-term Spiritualized keyboardist and Jason's cosmic twin since time immemorial, she has, it has recently come to light, been seen out and about with none other than Richard Ashcroft, fellow astral traveller and leader of The Verve. Added to this revelation comes the news that she will not be joining the band on their current 15-date European tour, which started in Brussels two nights ago and which will

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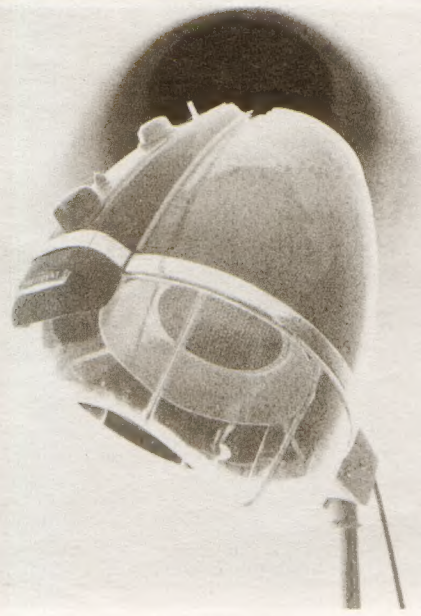

THE BISQUE!

culminate in Amsterdam prior to their UK dates next month. Tongues will be wagging… but hang on. Jason, now elegantly lounging in the hotel bar, is looking at your correspondent with the weary resignation of a man who never reads his *own* press, let alone the bits filled with the tittle-tattle of speculation.

"Kate's only absent at the moment because she's not well enough to do the tour. That's all that needs to be said. She hasn't left the band. She's not here because she's not well, so… that's all there is to it. She should be back with us when we play the UK dates in October…"

Does he think her absence from the touring party this time around will make a difference to the way you behave?

"Well, we've always had Kate and Caron *(tour manager)* on the road with us, so we've never really been prone to that sort of 'all lads together' behaviour. We're not like a travelling circus where the road crew are the strongmen and there's a jester and stuff like that. We're more like a family…"

A pause.

"People aren't like that in this band, we'd never regress just because she's not here. I don't sit there and stick on *Evil Dead* or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and run around naked…"

Jason pauses. Suddenly the indignation has vanished and a quizzical look comes into his eye.

"You're not trying to psychoanalyse me are you?"

THE EXPLORATION of the subconscious, according to Sigmund Freud, leads us to discover the mind's true desires and fears. All manner of artists, from the surrealists to present day scandal-monger Damien Hirst, have used the discoveries made by the good doctor here in Vienna to provide the impetus for all manner of hidden meanings and shocking undertones in their work. Unconscious expression, so the theory goes, is where meaning really lies. In the case of Jason Pierce then, what better place to meet?

After all, here is a man who over the years has managed to say so little it speaks volumes. From the far-off days of the Spacemen 3 and their drooling quest for the perfect prescription, right through to the out-of-their-frazzled minds glory of the utterly fried and fabulous 'Ladies And Gentlemen We Are Floating In Space', the message has been utterly clear: that a belief in music can touch highs further and beyond anything you could find in a book or a bottle should you feel its power keenly enough.

The only thing is, with this record Spiritualized have reached a point so far distant from their peers there's no competition left. While the Jason of yore might have made a record drowning in self-indulgence given that, having recorded it in 11 days he then took two whole years to mix it, 'Ladies And Gentleman…' glides along with a grace rarely seen in these days of fast turnover pop and frenetic careering. In a world where their peers are endlessly demanding that their fans stand up and be counted, 'Ladies And Gentleman…' has the effortlessness and serenity of a classical record, a record destined to trouble 'Greatest Album' polls for years to come. Happy, however, it ain't. Was he striving to make the woe ever-present in the record almost manifest itself physically in the listener?

"Well even on a basic level, the more primal thing, music has that power. If you play a drumbeat faster than your heartbeat it excites you, if you play a drumbeat slower than your heartbeat it relaxes you… that's been proven, in the same way that people with severe neurological damage, like Parkinson's disease, can come out of their immobile state to music… only to go immediately back into that state afterwards. I'm interested in soul and the way it *(music)* can be more than just aural… it can be physical pleasure when you feel it in your spine and down your neck."

Suddenly Jason stiffens. Has he heard the sound of a luscious Wagnerian chorus re-routed through the noise-filter of Stockhausen interpreted by Al Green? No, it appears not. Instead, while reminding himself of the visceral thrill he feels while playing his music onstage, he has remembered his lack of commercial 'success'.

"We all laugh about not having any money, just at how comic it is… We've just got back from America and we've played a lot of shows there, we've been about six or seven times… but over here it's different… there's no support. The last time we came to Vienna was ten years ago with Spacemen…"

Does he see his role with Spiritualized as part of a holy quest?

"I think our music does have mass appeal, it's just getting people to hear about it. It's like our guitarist Mike Mooney says, there's 50,000 towns in the whole of the world, if you can't get some sucker in each of those towns to buy a record then you may as well give up."

Of course, neither is chart success their grail, according to Jason, the archaic notion of judging the popularity of records according to how many copies they sell in a single week.

"If I could sell a million records over the course of a lifetime or over ten minutes it wouldn't matter. I'm not in competition with anyone." – Jason

"They *(the charts)* only reflect speed of record sales… so people using that as a measure of success to me, as a musician, I find hard to get excited about. If I worked for a record company then I might get excited about them."

Does he not feel alienated being constantly compared to groups who live and breathe by their weekly chart-placings, then?

"Well what we're doing I consider radical by contrast. In the same way as you have slimming by contrast, where you don't take any weight off, you just surround yourself with fatter people. I think that's the same with us. If you put our music next to anything by Casper Brotzmann *(noisy avant-garde type)* then that will normalise it, because that's so extreme. But everything else you might compare us to is so compromised to commerce. Everyone wants to climb the same ladder… *(adopts mindset of record company marketing man)* 'We have this sort of campaign, we have this sort of video, we format the single.'

"…They *(other bands)* want to win at commerce, not at music. If I could sell a million records over the course of a lifetime or over ten minutes it wouldn't matter. How fast you spread the word isn't important. I'm not in competition that way, I'm not in competition with anyone. Spiritualized aren't dealing with these kind of ideas. I like Brian Eno's line, 'I'm sick of the glut of CDs'."

As far as Jason can see, the only action to take in such a situation is no action.

"I'm not releasing any further singles off the album because they have to be formatted," he announces airily.

"When we released 'Electricity' it had a live album with it, and unwittingly it became formatted. I was just trying to give people a live album for £6 instead of £14, but it backfired. I've been told by record company people that if we put a single out we have to compete on an even pitch, which means we have to put about three versions out. I think that's an incredibly clever way of record companies and publishing companies to get more material out of bands for nothing…"

SHOOTING THE breeze with Spiritualized on the road means three things: knowing your vintage soul albums (and the vanguard of drum'n'bass if Jason's fondness for Aphrodite is anything to go by); being aware that Casper Brotzmann isn't the goalkeeper for Rapid Vienna; and understanding that should you mention Sonic Boom make sure you're talking about travelling on Concorde. This is a group whose dressing room has Charlie Mingus CDs lying next to the grapes, red wine and soft cheese. 3 Colours Red it ain't.

"Well I just think there's so many people who don't know their music," announces Jason the next day at the wonderfully sleazy Szene Club.

"There's just things that you should know. I get surprised at people both who make music and who do interviews, whose musical knowledge isn't all that great…"

But music's not about snobbery or knowledge though, is it? It's about *feeling*.

"Yeah, I'm not saying that, that's a very childish thing, that snobbery, saying, 'I'm hip to this'. It's just that there's so little that's actually good. Some of it's got soul and some of it hasn't. I just know what moves me. I'm not saying that from the viewpoint of being a snob. I'd just find it hard-pushed for someone not to see the soul in someone like Sam Cooke."

Or, let it be said, Spiritualized. The show, in front of an appreciative if diminutive Viennese crowd of diehards and the curious, veers wildly between full-throttle noise pyrotechnics and gentle flowing undulations of sound. Jason, squeezed into a gleaming white T-shirt on the right of the stage, lets the songs flow around him until they build up from an opening trio of 'Shine A Light', 'Electric Mainline' and a mind-scrabbling 'Electricity' into a wave of sound that comprises 'Come Together', a twice-as-slow as on record 'Think I'm In Love' and a final brain-numbing ride across 'These Blues', replete with corkscrew-topped harmonica-player Sean Cook lacerating his lips in the name of art. All the while the band, including former Julian Cope keyboard player Thighpaul Sandra (thankfully rechristened Tim Jeffries for this tour), saxophonist Ray Dickaty and drummer Damon Reece keep the flow into a massaging wave of aural toxins.

Songs get down, they get up again, but nothing's gonna keep Jason Pierce from spreading them all over the world. His latest project, he announces before clambering aboard the bus *en route* for Bologna, is to play three separate shows: at the CN Tower in Toronto – the highest freestanding building in the world – at the Seers Tower in Chicago and the World Trade Center before the end of the year.

To be floating in space indeed, where earthly matters such as the pointlessness of chart positions and the pleasures of a traditional Sunday roast are, well, beneath him.

Which, when you think about it, is just where they should be.

HAYLEY MADDEN

Minestrone of sound (arf!): Jason enjoys a post-soup tab and (above) the band floats on